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LOCAL VOICES

Power to people, not bureaucrats

By BRIAN SCHWARTZ

Back by popular demand: Democracy," declares the UCSU-elections slogan. "Vote upstairs, now!" exhort signs in the recreation center. "But no matter who you choose, JUST VOTE TODAY!" pleads a UCSU Graduate Senator.

Why do those in power want us to vote, regardless of whether we vote for them or their cause, or how informed we are about the candidates and issues?

The above sentiments share one idea: that democracy is good for its own sake. Democracy is like a religion to bureaucrats who enjoy the political process — the lobbying, compromising and the prestigious titles that bring them media attention — as an end in itself. Voting is democracy's defining ritual that legitimizes their titles and status.

"Electoral participation ... has the effect of substituting consent for coercion as the foundation of the state's power. ... At least since the nineteenth century ... governments have attempted to use popular voting to enhance their own authority and legitimacy," writes Professor Benjamin Ginsberg of Johns Hopkins. Political scientist Robert Weissberg calls this "psychological co-optation via participation: I take part, cast my vote, therefore I am implicated."

If you vote, you consent to the process's legitimacy and hence, the result. If you don't vote, people say you have no right to complain. Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

Ginsberg continues, "Election day, like Christmas or Yom Kippur, is the high holiday, a day of homage and reaffirmation, in the creed of the modern state." Is it a coincidence that the Latin root of "suffrage" means "prayer"?

A fellow student once left me speechless by asking: "If a majority votes for it, isn't it OK?" No. The means do not justify the ends, and CU's referenda policy for allocating student fees to student groups is just one example. The slogan for UCSU's "iVote" system is "You decide." Orwell would be proud of such Doublespeak. UCSU currently taxes each student about \$10 per semester to fund affiliated student groups who petition to be on the ballot. The 2004 Election Code states: "To pass in popular vote, the referendum must be approved by a majority of voters and have at least ten percent of the students eligible to vote at the time of the election voting in favor of the referenda question." Not one student decides how his money is spent; instead, their vote imposes their will on others. Either all students funds a group, or none do. Is this the same school that preaches empowerment, diversity, and tolerance? The "iVote" slogan should be "Mob rule."

Since students cannot decide how to spend their own money, and odds are that their vote will make no difference, voter apathy is no surprise. Note that just over 5% of students can determine how the rest spend their money. Remember that when student-group representatives claim that the "student body voted to fund their organization." They are either lying or deluded.

For reasons suggested above, campus bureaucrats want students to vote. Yet, students tend not to vote because it's not worth the time investment. Let's solve both problems by "taking back our democracy," throwing it away, and replacing power-over-people with actual "power to the people." If there must be a fee (say, \$10) for student groups, let students choose how to allocate their own money to affiliated student groups who successfully petition.

This way, each student decides while not imposing that decision on others. Since each student's decision makes a difference, they will have more reason to participate. That is what "You Decide" should mean. This system will also level the playing field for "the little guys", the "fringe groups" that would never win in a majority-rule vote. This increased competition for student fee dollars will result in better student activism. The newly-elected UCSU officers must seriously consider this proposal and not let details such as allocating fees of non-voters and new software implementation kill it.

"This is how taxes should work," people reply when I describe my proposal. Their observation addresses the more important issue at hand. The current student-group funding policy is insidious: students tacitly and erroneously regard citizenship in a state or country to be analogous to membership in a club. They leave the University to join "Real World U," where non-profits replace student groups and taxes replace tuition and student fees. They accept the legitimacy of the bureaucrats to co-opt power and authority to line their own pockets and those of special interests under the pretext of solving social problems.

In this sense, democracy worship is the social problem, not the panacea.

Brian Schwartz is a doctoral candidate at CU and the unanimously-voted Grand Poob-Bah of the Campus Libertarians.

correction:
10%
But the point
is still valid. - BTS

correction:
Weissberg